Gabrielle Calvocoressi

I'm just another one of the reader people

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Poesy Café

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Presenter: Tom Corrado

Walking is really one of those spaces where I can be exactly in my sweet spot, in the dream world and the real world at once. I am definitely someone to talk to myself as I walk. Most poems don't happen unless there's like a good long walk attached to them. That's the place where I'm dreaming and everything intersects over and over and over and over again.

Why Gabrielle Calvocoressi?

The bowtie! It was the bowtie! On the cover of the November/December 2015 issue of *The American Poetry Review,* and again 10 years later on the September/October cover was a photo of a woman - the same woman - wearing a bowtie. The poet Gabrielle Calvocoressi sporting a bowtie! How cool is that? There was no way I was not going to check out the poems of a bowtie-wearing poet. So I did. And I liked them . . . a lot!

Bio

Gabrielle Calvocoressi, a non-binary lesbian, was born in 1974 in central Connecticut. Their family owned movie theaters, including a drive-in, in several small towns across Connecticut. They received a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and an MFA from Columbia University.

Calvocoressi teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in the low-residency MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in Asheville,

North Carolina. They live with their partner, Ageline Shaka, in Carrboro, North Carolina. They are Senior Poetry Editor at *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and Poetry Editor at *Southern Cultures.*

Calvocoressi is the author of *The New Economy* (Copper Canyon Press, 2025), long-listed for the National Book Award; *Rocket Fantastic* (Persea Books, 2017), winner of The Publishing Triangle's Audre Lorde Award for Lesbian Poetry; *Apocalyptic Swing* (Persea Books, 2009), which was a finalist for the 2009 Los Angeles Times Book Prize; *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart* (Persea Books, 2005), which was short-listed for the Northern California Book Award and was the winner of the Connecticut Book Award in Poetry, and a chapbook, *From the Mortality Sessions* (2011).

Calvocoressi is the recipient of numerous honors and fellowships, including a Wallace Stegner Fellowship and the Jones Lectureship from Stanford University, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, a Lannan Foundation residency in Marfa, Texas, the Bernard F. Conners Prize for Poetry from *The Paris Review,* and a residency from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation.

Calvocoressi's poems have been published in numerous magazines and journals including *The New York Times, Poetry, Boston Review, Kenyon Review, Tin House,* and *The New Yorker.*

Poetics

Gabrielle Calvocoressi's poetry attempts to create a place where people can hold something for each other, where there is room to breathe. - Jonathan Farmer

Calvocoressi is a daring act as a poet/athlete . . . but she can also travel the backwoods, pointing out herons, ivy vines and creek water with a kind of divining rod rightness. . . . Her wild lyrics shudder and shine, jubilant and threatening, exuberant. - Carol Muske-Dukes, *Huffington Post*

Calvocoressi resists the limitations of language - especially where gender is concerned - to more fully capture the experience of a self unlimited in its possibilities. Their poems balance wildness and control in a fearless treatment of eros, identity, trauma, and all that resists easy categorization. Their voice encompasses the colloquial as well as the high lyrical . . . When particular forms aren't up to the task of rendering something with tender and unflinching attentiveness, Calvocoressi reaches outside of poetry altogether: "Oh. It. Was. Beautiful. No metaphor will do." - Publishers Weekly

Calvocoressi's poems examine gender, queer loneliness, bodily awareness, mental health, and familial tension. They have used their writing to reflect on their mother's mental illness and suicide. Their work gives voice to the hope and heartbreak of small-town America, its history, sexuality, faith, and violence.

Their poems sing with the musicality of a poet who understands both the power of sound and silence - those quiet spaces inviting us to consider the words we cannot hear. *The days I don't kill myself are extraordinary. . . . Why don't we have a name for it?*

Calvocoressi was born with nystagmus, a visual condition where the eyes are constantly spasming. It took them a while to learn how to walk and balance, so as a young child, they spent a lot of time sitting on the floor, daydreaming and observing the world.

These observations later became fodder for their writing. They had always been a reader but turned to writing more seriously at the age of 13 when their mother committed suicide. Throughout high school and college, their passion for writing, especially poetry, grew, and they went on to get an MFA in poetry from Columbia University.

Calvocoressi's latest publication, *The New Economy* (Copper Canyon Press, 2025), explores grief in its various forms, alternating between the perspectives of their childhood and present selves. Their intimate and inventive collection of *cistern* poems reconsiders the body, mourns the passing of childhood traits, the loss of loved ones, young heartbreak, and feelings of disconnection from community. They invite us to join together - in their words, *Come on, Everybody* - to find solace in unprecedented places, reminding all readers that it is a poet's work to slowly and carefully interpret the world around them with dedication and care.

Here's Calvocoressi . . .

I began to construct a world in my mind, a sort of movie where all those beautiful women waited for me and the light looked like it does in Los Angeles. I built narratives of escape and occasional violence. I imagined myself inhabiting various bodies and speaking in multiple voices. I look back at it now and realize I was learning to write poems. I know it sounds like I was learning to write stories but really I was learning to push against and work with silence, which lies at the heart of my poems. All of those dreams I had were a way of countering the reality that my mother was mentally ill and desperately poor, that I lived in a town where being gay or different in any way put one in very real danger.

Like many poets at the start of their writing lives I was so caught up in received ideas of beauty. I couldn't imagine that the tobacco fields and power plant and boys driving by in their trucks and throwing their sodas and God knows what else at me could be worked into something beautiful. And so for a very long time I wrote well-meaning and profoundly flat poems. I wrote poems that didn't sound like my life at all. And then I think I let myself do something that might be best categorized as *American.* I decided to go past the edge of the poetic village I'd made for myself and into a more dangerous and uncharted place where I laid my received notions of beauty aside and began to work with what I actually had. I

had the stories of a circus fire that haunted me. I had the memory of driving past the adult drive-in and watching the women up on the screen. I had the memory of the football players sitting on the bus with girls on their laps. The images rose like movies in my mind and then I had to make something urgent and necessary out of them. I had to find the place where those voices overlapped with my own. And how that could be a key to pushing into the unspeakable.

I had begun reading poems when I was like 16 in the strangest way. Seamus Heaney and Donald Hall came to my school to read in the space of one year (I was a day student at a very fancy boarding school and was constantly trying not to fail out). They came and that was the first time I thought, *Oh, there's this thing called a poet.* Then I got a job at this bookstore in Wallingford, Connecticut, called Library Hours, and I didn't really know how to find contemporary poets, so I just flipped over the Seamus Heaney book and looked at the blurbs and got the books by the people who wrote them. I sort of taught myself contemporary American poetry by reading blurbs. I didn't realize that I was reading in circles of friends and people who knew each other in poetic circles.

I had been writing all these long poems about my mom dying - long, long, long poems, with really dense narrative. I don't want to say they weren't good, they were well-intentioned, but they had one story. They worked that story over and over and over again. I was in a kind of rut. I was new at grad school and Lucie Brock-Broido walked into class and she put the long poem I'd written down on my desk, and then she took Cavafy's *The City* and put it on top of my poem. At the bottom of the page, it just said *Do this. . . .* This was pre-internet, so I couldn't just email Lucie: *But what do you mean by that?* I had to figure out what did it mean to do what Cavafy did. I remember going home and sitting reading that poem over and over again, *you've wasted your life here, in this small corner, / you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.* It was so plain spoken, it was so different, I thought, than what I did. But the thing that was so genius about Lucie was that she knew what my poetic insides were. She wasn't saying, *Go, be someone else.* She was saying, *Go see what happens when you do this.*

History is a bunch of disparate events happening where people don't necessarily know they are a part of something accumulating toward something bigger. We make a story of history, but really it's the accumulation of all these tiny little events. That's something my work thinks about generally.

How does every person not cry out all the time?

Trying to find words for the unspeakable is something that I think about a lot.

It's three minutes to midnight. I'm barefoot and eating muscat grapes. Some green sweetness is dripping down the keys from my fingers. A bit of grape skin stuck in my throat tells me I am alive. It's the little things, I think, that anchor me to this world. Hair caught in my scrunchie. Pen smudge on my thumb. The red blinking

light in the kitchen that tells me I'm out of cold water. Some days, when they make their presence known, the discovery sets my whole body ablaze. *I'M ALIVE,* I want to shout from my balcony. *I'M ALIVE I'M ALIVE I'M ALIVE.*

No one tells you about the incredible pain of wanting to disappear and yet wanting to be the first thing your beloved sees in the morning when they wake up. How can I live two lives and see both to fruition? How do I reconcile with the self that yearns to be here and the self that wants to die? When I tell you I am wounded I mean the world has cracked open, there at the rind.

Some days I am farther along. And by that I mean: showers, yay, and perhaps breakfast. Standing barefoot in the kitchen making coffee before walking slowly back to my desk, careful not to spill. Then it's off to writing, or whatever it is I can do in order to make enough to live by.

Some days I spill the coffee and I collapse to the floor in tears, wondering if I'll ever be okay. And normal.

Some days it's suddenly seven in the evening, and I've forgotten to have a bath, and fuck where have the hours gone and why do my shoulders hurt from being hunched over and shit pain shoots up from my elbow to my wrist. I munch absent-mindedly on a stale cookie and realize only too late that it's my breakfast, lunch, and dinner altogether.

Some days I tell myself I'm really going to take out the garbage this time, and I do. I even take my meds.

You tell me over and over: *I fucking love you.* I hug the words to my chest like a talisman. Then I pick myself up, and all the other selves still lying on the cold floor in all the other days. I let the echo of your words travel to the darkest corners of myself. I say to no one in particular: *I'm going to make it. Because I have to. Because I want to.*

Every day that makes me get out of bed is a checkpoint I save as if I have an opportunity to come back later and redo my life after battling with monsters. Every day my feet touch the floor I know I have chosen not to meet my maker, at least not today. It is incredible what I would give to make sure the love of my life remains my love, remains my life. For example: eat breakfast. Take a shower. Not die.

Takeaway

Calvocoressi battles monsters in dangerous and uncharted places with other-worldly compassion. Lyrical and unafraid, they invite us to name our fears and sorrows, to write to who or what has left us, to create practices that can hold both the darkness and light of our *one wild and precious life.* For Calvocoressi,

the glass remains half-full

Poems

Hammond B3 Organ Cistern

(Audio: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1482125679361394)

The days I don't want to kill myself
are extraordinary. Deep bass. All the people
in the streets waiting for their high fives
and leaping, I mean leaping,
when they see me. I am the sun-filled
god of love. Or at least an optimistic
under-secretary. There should be a word for it.
The days you wake up and do not want
to slit your throat. Money in the bank.
Enough for an iced green tea every weekday
and Saturday and Sunday! It's like being
in the armpit of a Hammond B3 organ.
Just reeks of gratitude and funk.
The funk of ages. I am not going to ruin
my love's life today. It's like the time I said yes
to gray sneakers but then the salesman said
Wait. And there, out of the back room,
like the bakery's first biscuits: bright-blue kicks.
Iridescent. Like a scarab! Oh, who am I kidding,
it was nothing like a scarab! It was like
bright. blue. fucking. sneakers! I did not
want to die that day. Oh, my God.
Why don't we talk about it? How good it feels.
And if you don't know then you're lucky
but also you poor thing. Bring the band out on the stoop.
Let the whole neighborhood hear. Come on, Everybody.
Say it with me nice and slow
no pills no cliff no brains onthe floor
Bring the bass back. no rope no hose not today,
Satan.
Every day I wake up with my good fortune
and news of my demise. Don't keep it from me.
Why don't we have a name for it?
Bring the bass back. Bring the band out on the stoop.
Hallelujah!

Achingly Beautiful How the Sky Blooms Umber at the End of the Day, Through the Canopy

Summers spent practicing in the apartment
stairwell: hand on the banister, one foot after
another. Did I ever tell you I couldn't walk

until I was three and then sort of dragged
myself up and downstairs until I was seven
or eight? That burgundy carpet.

I'd stop to breathe and look out the window,
over brick tenements, toward the Capitol
building. Oak leaves so full of late summer

sun even I thought, "Obscene" and stood stunned
for a moment. My God. The urge to rest like the birds
on the phone wires, chatting like barristers

at the end of the day. Myself the useless
Ambassador from the third floor. I was the last one
up so the door was left open. I can still see it gaping

from two stories down. Sometimes music played.
Sometimes I'd smell supper. Neighbors stopped
to say hello. Achingly beautiful how the sky

looked as I stood after they left. Nicer somehow
in the middle. All the trees tucking blackbirds
into their darkness. It really did take this long.

Miss you. Would like to take a walk with you.

Do not care if you just arrive in your skeleton.
Would love to take a walk with you. Miss you.
Would love to make you shrimp saganaki.
Like you used to make me when you were alive.
Love to feed you. Sit over steaming
bowls of pilaf. Little roasted tomatoes
covered in pepper and nutmeg. Miss you.
Would love to walk to the post office with you.
Bring the ghost dog. We'll walk past the waterfall
and you can tell me about the after.
Wish you. Wish you would come back for a while.
Don't even need to bring your skin sack. I'll know
you. I know you will know me even though. I'm
bigger now. Grayer. I'll show you my garden.
I'd like to hop in the leaf pile you raked but if you

want to jump in? I'll rake it for you. Miss you
standing looking out at the river with your rake
in your hand. Miss you in your puffy blue jacket.
They're hip now. I can bring you a new one
if you'll only come by. Know I told you
it was okay to go. Know I told you
it was okay to leave me. Why'd you believe me?
You always believed me. Wish you would
come back so we could talk about truth.
Miss you. Wish you would walk through my
door. Stare out from the mirror. Come through
the pipes.

Most Days I Want to Live

Not all days. But most days
I do. Most days the garden's
almost enough: little pink flowers
on the sage, even though
the man said we couldn't eat
it. Not this kind. And I said,
Then, gosh. What's the point?
The flowers themselves,
I suppose. The rain came
and then the hail came and my love
brought them in. Even tipped
over they look optimistic.
I know it's too late to envy
the flowers. That century's
over and done. And hope?
That's a jinx. But I did set them
right. I patted them a little.
And prayed for myself, which
is embarrassing to admit
in this day and age. But I did it.
Because no one was looking
or listening anyway.

The Sun Got All Over Everything

Over the boys and girls by the pool,
over the bougainvillea, which got so hot
my palms stayed warm for minutes after.
It made a mess of a day
that was supposed to be the worst
and lured me outside so I forgot her death entirely.

And also the polar bears scrambling
on the ice chips. And also that there was no water
in the Golden State. The pool was full
and the sun poured across the women's bodies
so you had to shade your eyes. Or I did. I had to
put my hand up to see what they were saying.
I know it's no excuse. And I had made a plan
to cry all day

and into the evening. I marked in my book,
which seems like something I'd make up in a poem
except this time I actually did it.
I wrote: Grieve. Because we're all so busy
aren't we? And so broke. I needed to make
an appointment with my anguish, so I could
take my mind off buying groceries
that I really couldn't afford. Anyway.
I didn't mean to go outside except there
the sky was, just ridiculously blue,
taunting me with pigment that I felt
the need to name. And from somewhere
close by a voice I couldn't see because the sun
was like a yolk cracked over it said,

What are you drinking? And I said,
I'm grieving. I'm very busy remembering.
I made an appointment because last year
I forgot and then felt awful. The sun opened
its mouth and made a gong of the canyons.

It poured across the girls and slicked across
their Dior lenses. I put my tongue on it
exactly when I should have been tearing
at my clothes and lighting candles.
I got on top and let it find the tightness
in my back and open where my wings would
be. Somewhere my mother was dying
and someone was skinning a giraffe.
And I let it go. I just let it go.

Rocket Fantastic

It's ridiculous what fame
can buy you. Not the beast
but the tiny, frightened
man who brings him

in a cage from Alhambra,
who stands in the doorway
as the three girls finish,
get off the bed and walk down
to the pool, giggling as they pass.
The Bandleader borrowed
a tiger because we saw it
in a reel the studio sent over,
some movie about a prince
that played against the wall
of the upstairs bedroom.
Sometimes a girl would jump
into the pool and the waves
shimmered up. In the movie
the prince brings the tiger
to the castle and it rules
alongside him, "That's not
believable," the Bandleader
said and then, "Don't stop."
And then, "Ah. Right there."
The prince would place his hand
on the tiger's head and grab
his hair in his fist and move
it around. I liked to watch
him start to want things, a wetness
forming in his mind. There were
three girls squealing in the pool
and the waves came up to us
as ripples of light that I passed
my fingers through, "You're blue
with gold stripes," the Bandleader
said, looking up at me
but imagining the tiger beside him
already, before he even
reached for the phone.

Homecoming Cistern Alien Vessel

Oh, my planet, how beautiful
you are. Little curve that leads me
to the lakeside. Let me step out

of the sack of skin I wore
on earth. It's good to be home.
No more need to name me. No more

need to make the shape of a machete
with my mouth. Pushing up up up the tired
sides that want to drop below my teeth.

Lord, I've missed you. The streets
covered all day in light from the moons.
I was confused all the time. I wanted so much.

My hole felt like a gut with an antler
rammed through it. So lonely and strange
and always trying to smile. Coin of the realm.

And my arms open and my life
coming in and out of the "ATM."
Once I saw a fox leap inside the morning

light and made the same shape
of myself. Once I watched the boats
and also rocked back and forth.

How does every person not cry out
all the time? Yes, it was good to eat
doughnuts. Yes. I was blessed by many

days of joy. A rabbit in the driveway.
A rosemary bush with a sorcerer's cloak
of spider webs. Brian Eno.

The Hammond B3 Organ that never asked
me who I knew. But that body.
Like a factory. That mind like a ship

built to pile in other bodies. Skin like a
sow without any of the sow's equanimity.
It reflected nothing. Pink skin. Blue eyes

hard as an anvil. Like a window with covering
that refuses the passerby's gaze. I loved
the bully power some days. Oh my pleasure

in not causing harm. My pride. I'm not like
so-and-so. My pink skin preaching, my pink skin
yawping out my other hole, "I did not choke

the man with my elbow!" "Would never!"
"I let all the boys in hoodies walk

through dark streets." "I did not shoot

them with my guns!" The ship rising
up inside me. As if the fox felt pride
for not tearing the bird to pieces. As if

the owl's heart grew large from not
wrecking the squirrel's nest. My pink skin
a sail full of indignation. My eyes pitching

across the feed. It is so good to be home
and yet. I have a ship inside. How can
the organ welcome me? I'm not a sow

on her worst day. Which would be what?
Breaking from the barn? Eating all the acorns
and rolling in the mud? No.

Her worst would be at my hands
and on my plate for supper. Grow
like the tree, the man who heals

the bodies said. In every way I became
the ship rising in the harbor.
How can I be welcomed after that?

Null Point

The first thing I learned was to look wide
at the darkness

and not want anything. He'd say, Just look
at the darkness

and tell me what you see. I'd say, I see stars or
Just the stars, Dad.

And he'd say, Don't call them that yet. What do you see?
Just the stars, Dad.

But then I'd be quiet and let my eyes go and look wide
at the darkness.

It was like a dome. I think it frightened me to stare
at the darkness.

I see light. I see a million little lights. And he'd say
They aren't all stars.

Some were planets and some were planes and I'd say, Yeah,
they aren't all stars.

But not really believe it. But say it so not to feel stupid out there
in the darkness.

A Word From the Fat Lady

It isn't how we look up close
so much as in dreams.

Our giant is not so tall,
our lizard boy merely flaunts

crusty skin- not his fault
they keep him in a crate

and bathe him maybe once a week.
When folks scream or clutch their hair

and poke at us and glare and speak
of how we slithered up from Hell,

it is themselves they see:
the preacher with the farmer's girls

(his bulging eyes, their chicken legs)
or the mother lurching towards the sink,

a baby quivering in her gnarled
hands. Horror is the company

you keep when shades are drawn.
Evil does not reside in cages.